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Viewing cable 06BOGOTA9216, PROMISING NEW COLMIL LEADERSHIP OFF TO ROCKY START

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| Reference ID | Created | Released | Classification | Origin |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 06BOGOTA9216 | 2006-10-05 17:14 | 2011-08-30 01:44 | CONFIDENTIAL | Embassy Bogota |

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SUBJECT: PROMISING NEW COLMIL LEADERSHIP OFF TO ROCKY START

Summary

¶1. (C) Colombia's new military high command contains a potentially promising line-up of leaders but they are off to a rocky start. The new COLMIL Commander's lack of tactical experience has undermined his credibility with service chiefs and opened the way for the Army Commander to usurp his authority over joint commands. This in turn could complicate the Plan Patriota campaign. End Summary.

Overview: New Appointments

¶2. (U) In mid-August the GOC and COLMIL ushered in new leadership to the military high command. Incoming Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos tapped General Freddy Padilla as Armed Forces Commander. Santos named the service chiefs as follows: General Mario Montoya remains as Army Commander; Vice Admiral Guillermo Enrique Barrera assumes the Navy command; General Jorge Ballesteros takes charge of the Air Force; and General Jorge Daniel Castro remains as Police director. In mid-September, the COLMIL announced the transfer of Joint Task Force Omega commander General Gilberto Rocha to an unspecified position, along with the accelerated field deployment of 58 new officers to alleviate acute COLAR command shortages.

Santos: Civ/Mil Relations and Public Image

¶3. (C) The appointment of Juan Manuel Santos as Minister of Defense may bode well for COLMIL relations with the government and the Colombian public. As founder of the U party and a cousin of the Vice President, Santos is well connected to President Uribe. This may allow him greater ministerial autonomy, buffering Uribe's tendency to micro-manage field commanders, a regular source of past friction. Santos is believed to aspire to the presidency in 2010 and may be more results oriented and press-seeking than his more reclusive predecessor. However, Santos' personal ambition also risks provoking resentment within the military and/or resistance from political rivals.

Padilla: Early Stumbling

¶4. (C) Like Santos, new Armed Forces Commander GEN Padilla is a political operator. However, his tactical command has been limited to engineering and intelligence brigades. Padilla has served mainly in staff officer roles, including as Joint Staff Chief, and is the Army's highest-ranking officer. Padilla is seen as a politician and planner likely to focus on strategic joint staff issues like budgeting, personnel, and doctrinal reform while leaving operations to the field command. Still, that formula does not appear to be working for Padilla so far. In a recent meeting with Santos and his service chiefs, his operational inexperience led Padilla to make foolish remarks, denting his credibility. The Defense Minister later rejected every one of Padilla's recommendations.

COLAR Command Tensions

¶5. (C) Santos reportedly strongly dislikes Army Commander GEN Montoya. Padilla and Montoya are opposites in personality. Padilla is reflective and intellectual, while Montoya is brusque and aggressive. Their skills could be

complementary, with Padilla focused on institutional priorities while allowing Montoya to run his command. In practice, however, Montoya appears to be usurping Padilla's authority and assuming joint command functions, something he was unable to do under former Armed Forces Commander GEN Ospina, due to the latter's field expertise. Montoya has few friends among his fellow service chiefs, and his behavior could cause rifts. While Padilla is likely to retain Plan Patriota's focus on high value targets (HVTs) and support Joint Task Force Omega, Montoya is a more conventional combat officer who may seek to undermine special operations.

Rocha: Anointed or Sidelined?

¶6. (C) In mid-September, the COLMIL announced additional promotions related to Joint Task Force Omega (JTF-O) which may signal a cascade of changes in 2007. Current commander General Gilberto Rocha will be transferred in December to an unspecified position, handing over his command to his former FUDRA (rapid response unit) commander GEN Navas, who in turn will be replaced by new war college grad COL (promotable to GEN) Leyseca. Rocha's availability might confirm rumors that the COLAR's current Padilla-Montoya partnership may be of limited duration.

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